

Pair have been tireless advocates for victims

Benefield, Skramstad have been on front lines of asbestos issue

By LYNNETTE HINTZE
The Daily Inter Lake

LIBBY — "It's starting to hammer me," Les Skramstad said, gasping for air as he settled into his easy chair. "It's closing in on me and I know that."

Skramstad is dying from the asbestos he inhaled during a two-year stint at the Libby vermiculite mine more than four decades ago. His wife, Norita, has the death sentence, too, though her disease isn't as advanced.

Across town, Gayla Benefield is on the phone, fielding questions from a Baltimore reporter about the federal grand jury investigations under way for W.R. Grace & Co.

Grace is being investigated for possible obstruction of federal agency proceedings and conspiring with others to violate federal environmental laws.

When Benefield finishes with the reporter, she will attempt to get caught up on her e-mail. For the last five years, a lot of people have demanded a portion of her time.

BENEFIELD AND SKRAMSTAD have been the rabble-rousers in the Libby asbestos saga, asking Grace and every local, state and federal agency the tough questions about why no one was watching all those



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years ago when the first reports of asbestos began surfacing.

People knew about the problem, or at least they should have.

Regional daily newspapers began running stories in the 1970s and '80s about asbestos claims filed by miners.

In September 1988 the Missoulian bannered a headline in a Sunday edition that declared "Lawsuits allege deadly conditions at mine in Libby."

The Daily Inter Lake published earlier articles, too, such as the one on Oct. 2, 1985, that detailed findings from the National Institute for Occu-

pational Safety and Health. The federal probe showed previous conditions at the Libby mine more than doubled some employees' risk of dying from lung cancer and other respiratory diseases.

Benefield and Skramstad tried for years to shine the spotlight on Libby's asbestos troubles, but it wasn't until the story hit the national news media in 1999 that federal and state agencies sprang into action.

THEIR ADVOCACY HASN'T made them the most popular folks in town.



GAYLA BENEFIELD: "It's frustrating when you still encounter small segments that say we fabricated the whole thing. Some people still don't get it, but we've just moved forward."

They take it in stride, looking past the bickering and finger-pointing to the bigger picture of how much has changed for the good in Libby since late 1999.

"Our names are mud," Skramstad shrugged. "But they can't scare me."

His wife put in her two cents' worth: "Right here is the hardest sell. They still wish we'd just shut up."

Benefield has also taken the criticism in stride.

"I never did feel the hostility, but there was a wall of silence [from the community] occasionally," she said. "It's frustrating when you still encounter small segments that say we fabricated the whole thing. Some people still don't get it, but we've just moved forward."

Both Skramstad and Benefield have made numerous trips to Helena

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Pair keeps the pressure on in Libby

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and Washington, D.C., to testify on legislation to help asbestos victims.

They have accomplished much, but Benefield said there's still work to be done.

She gave Brian Schweitzer a tour of the town and filled him in when he visited during a campaign stop. He told her he's "committed" to helping Libby however he can, and she will hold his feet to the fire now that he has been elected governor.

At some point, the EPA will finish in Libby.

"Whatever isn't done here, the state will have to pick up where the EPA left off," Benefield said.

Skramstad's not sure how much more he'll be able to do in the way of advocacy work. He gets exhausted walking the 75 feet from his backyard shed to the house.

Skramstad and his wife are contemplating moving to Havre next spring, to be close to their five children, all of whom live in Havre.

It still bothers him that he's

Alphabet soup spells help

The results of the advocacy of Gayla Benefield and Les Skramstad are perhaps best illustrated in the acronym alphabet soup of citizen and support groups formed to handle various aspects of the asbestos problem.

The CAG — Community Advisory Group — began early in 2000 to be a watchdog over the cleanup and medical concerns.

The TAG — Technical Assistance Group — was created two years ago to help explain the technical side of the cleanup and serve as a link between the community and EPA.

The ARD-Net — Asbestos Related Disease Network — meets monthly to solve problems for asbestos victims who need things such as a ramp into a home that aren't covered in

other medical plans. It's worked "wonderfully," Benefield said.

The CHC — Community Health Care — is the safety net for the uninsured, offering affordable health care on a sliding scale for those who can't afford to treat their asbestos disease.

The LADC — Libby Area Development Corp. — was created to oversee use of the \$8 million economic development grant given to the city. It was recently disbanded when the City Council decided to resume control of the purse strings.

The CARD — Center for Asbestos Related Disease — provides medical care for about 1,500 patients with asbestos disease. In its future is a research center that's expected to attract international participation.

the one who brought the toxic asbestos dust into his house, exposing his wife and children. The two oldest children have been diagnosed with

asbestosis.

"The worst of it is I had not the faintest notion what I was doing was anything wrong," he said. "I really liked my job

even if it was dusty and nasty. You could see what you could accomplish in a day."

He's still got bones to pick with the way the EPA is handling the cleanup, the way the economic development money is being spent, the way Grace is shirking its duties.

"It's plumb obvious we have a problem," he said. "Everyone should've jumped up and said we have a problem. I think the town could've healed earlier if that had happened."

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